ONE OF THESE THINGS IS NOT LIKE THE OTHERS

STORIES BY

STEPHANIE JOHNSON

STORIES

MY NEIGHBOR DOESN'T REMEMBER EVERYTHING SHE FORGETS

MY NEIGHBOR HAS a new puppy that my dog likes to pee on. When my dog sees the puppy, he trots over to the chain link fence between our yards, spins a circle or two, lifts his leg, and lets loose. I try to deter this behavior, but my dog is stubborn.

I don't like to blame the victim, but the puppy isn't very smart. He sits there. He wags his tail. When the shower's over, he shakes. He puts his paws on the fence, begging for me to pet him, but I don't want to touch him. He's covered in piss.

My neighbor meets me at the fence. "Oh ho," she says. She claps her hands. "Look at that. I think he liked it." She laughs and the puppy wags his tail. He rolls over and she rubs his belly.

"Bad dog," I say, more because I want my neighbor to hear than because I think my dog listens to me. The dog likes my husband better.

"Oh, he never barks," my neighbor says. "You have a good dog. He's a good boy. He'll protect you if anyone tries to break in."

Even if I disagree, I try to accept compliments gracefully, especially when they come from someone who needs to give her puppy his tenth bath of the week. "He's a pretty good dog," I say.

She points at the puppy. "We're too old for this," she says. "But Hank, you know, he wanted the dog." She sighs. "What can you do? It doesn't do any good to argue. Men will do what men will do."

"Don't even try and stop them," I say.

"I've started getting in cars with men who aren't my husband," she continues. "Happened again yesterday.

Hank was supposed to pick me up in front of the post office. The man was kind enough, but he wasn't Hank. It wasn't our car. Can you imagine?"

My neighbor told me she wrote my name in a notebook she keeps by her refrigerator. I'm after her grandchildren's names and the date of her husband's last heart attack, but before the names of the new neighbors across the street and the list of who to call if Hank's pacemaker fails. She says when it gets bad enough, she'll have to pin a note on her shirt to remind her that everything she needs to remember is in that notebook.

"Tell me again," she says. "Where's your husband?"

When I don't answer quickly enough, she says, "Wait, wait. Don't tell me. You've told me before." She presses her fingers against her forehead. "I know you've told me. Don't tell me again."

It's hard to get a word in edgewise with my neighbor. She likes to talk, and I don't hold that against her. After seven decades, she's got a lot to say. She doesn't always know what happened fifteen minutes ago, but she *knows* things, important things.

Her face wrinkles. "I'm sorry," she says. She shakes her head.

The puppy yips. When he barks, he hops, propels himself off the ground. Despite recent events, he's happy. Nothing gets this dog down.

"You know," my neighbor says, "when I had my first, I didn't know what to do. I thought, My God, I've made a mistake. We didn't know anything then—we enjoyed food and sex, and then, well, that's what came

of it. A woman at our church couldn't have them. No one said anything about it, but everyone knew. And I thought, I'll give this to her…"

My neighbor curls her fingers in the fence. "I didn't think I wanted him," she says. Then she stops, presses her palm against her mouth. "What a horrible thing," she says. "What a horrible thing to remember. Why did I remember that?" Her eyes water and she shakes her head.

"I'm sorry," she says. "I don't remember everything I forget. Is your husband with his mother?"

He's not, but it's pretty to think so, so I nod.

"He'll come home soon," she says. She picks up the puppy, cradles him against her chest like a child.

I know I should take the dog in, but insomnia's rawness makes me want to talk. I remind her that she complimented me back then, said I looked healthy as if she could sense I never wore beauty conventionally, as if she knew my body belonged round and full, weighted and earthbound. Since then, others have told me that we have to accept what we can't change. They've said, *some things just happen* and *no one is to blame*. I know these things—we can't always beat the odds. But now my husband pays monthly for a room across town while I pay daily for vacancy. I tell her I think I see the face in my dreams. I tell her about what we measure in weeks and months and pounds, the things we can't hold—shouldn't count on to save us—because they're not here. I try to name the thing we never missed until it was lost, all the things that never stood a chance in this beautiful and brutal world.

MY GREAT-AUNT MEETS JESUS AT THE MOBIL STATION IN MONTANA

AFTER ENTERING the interstate against traffic—despite thunderous air horns and flashing headlights—my grandfather led our caravan into the filling station. My father, hotter than the overworked engine, slammed our wagon into park, slung obscenities through the open window of my grandfather's U-Haul.

Midwest to West Coast round-trip in seventy-two hours, including packing and loading my elderly great-aunt's possessions into the rental truck. Nonstop driving, greasy meals served on dashboards, consumed behind steering columns. No chance for relaxation, for a mini-vacation—no one even saw the ocean. Only four hours of rest in sleeping bags on a hardwood floor. *A suicide mission*, my father accused, his evidence endless.

My grandfather announced that my father was stupid enough to follow him down the wrong ramp, returning fire in a showdown of who could have hypothetically killed whom.

"Sleep," my father demanded. "We need some goddamned sleep."

My grandmother absconded on a pilgrimage for coffee and Tareytons. My mother leaned on the hood, vacantly chiseling dead insects from the windshield with her chipped fingernails. But my great-aunt took my hand and walked me to the deserted diesel pumps on the side of the station, acting as though she didn't know our family was divided like the highway.

"Meet my niece," she said once we stood on the self-service island. She gently nudged me forward to greet the middle pump. "Don't be afraid," she whispered. "Jesus loves children."

When I didn't move, she bridged the distance between the pump and me, an arm on each of us. "She's shy," she told the pump, assuredly wrapping failing fingers around his nozzle-thin arm, "but she's a good, good child."

The conversation continued. My aunt nodded, listening more than speaking, until my mother called across the lot, told us we were leaving. My father had conceded that the dangers of prolonging time on the road with my grandfather outweighed the hazard of pushing forward in a haze.

"Yes," my aunt said to the pump before we rejoined our family. "I'm coming home—see you soon."

In Michigan, my father let us use the bathroom at my grandparents' house, but we didn't stay for supper. We didn't unload the truck. He drove three more hours through darkness, refusing to unwind until we'd left my mother's family behind.

My aunt died, having been home for only forty-eight hours, giving us reason to argue over contrary names for the same situation—premonition, happenstance, God's will, a transgression that should have killed us all.

Years later, while traveling alone, I still struggle to make good time, but back roads, alleys, dead-ends become sirens seducing me to shipwreck. Perhaps my aunt knew how many ways a person can lose faith, how she can push a pin in a map, say *this is home*, but never navigate the details. She understood how hazy safe harbors are anything but, and how I worry that if I fall asleep—stop paying attention to the road for even a moment—I'll never escape being lost.

YOU ARE NOT CLARK KENT

EVEN THOUGH the house hasn't held babies in years, the mother baby-proofs the knife drawer as soon as the father leaves for work. When the daughter stumbles into the kitchen, sleep still tangled in the angles of her disheveled hair, the mother points out the change—a nylon latch with a simple, one-handed adult release.

For me? I could break that in a heartbeat, the daughter tells the mother, flexing meanness like a muscle. At fifteen, she can figure things out, isn't a baby anymore.

It's pointless, the mother lucidly agrees.

The daughter slips into a chair at the table, rubs her eyes. A normal mother would bring her juice, she thinks, or maybe even coffee. But this mother—*her* mother—barricades the knife drawer, imagines matricide, and flushes medication down the toilet. This mother hides in the garage when the daughter's friends come over and refuses calls from her own best friend.

I don't want to be replaced, the mother tells the daughter.

Who's signing up for *that* job?

The daughter yawns, stretches a bare leg, wiggles her toes. She's hungry, but doesn't want to decrease the distance between them. Remembering last night, she pulls the collar of her unchanged T-shirt over her nose, breathes souvenirs of the boy's summer body commingled with her slumber. She thinks of cigarettes smoked with the boy in the backseat of his car—afterward, while it rained—and how the boy cupped the cigarette between his middle finger and thumb, the ember close to his palm.

The mother presses the release on the useless latch. She spits fingernails into the sink, then chews fingertips. She pulls raw fingers through graying hair and stares out the kitchen window. You think it's fun now, the mother tells her stubborn and lovely baby, but you'll see…everything changes.

Uncomfortable, the daughter wants someone to do something. She wants a mother with clean hair and a father who deals with the disorder. She wants pancakes and chatter about boys, fashion magazines and gossip TV. She pretends her mother's voice is the boy's, hears words he whispers and means rather than the mother's arrhythmic, cryptic messages. She silences her rival's smoky suggestions of seduction and accepts the boy's extravagant vows of devotion. The daughter knows where she is—here in the kitchen, on her own. She has no idea who is supposed to protect whom, but understands that only babies believe a man of steel will swoop in and save them.

Eventually, the father returns, tie loosened and the top of his shirt unbuttoned. He fills the doorway, suit jacket over shoulder like a cape. And in this half-light, the growing girl recognizes his musky secret, the source of her mother's madness—*there,* then gone as he bumps his glasses up his nose.